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Christianity's Tangled Roots

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In recent years, Gnosticism has gained visibility through the best-selling works of both fiction and non-fiction writers. But just what is Gnosticism, and where does it fit in Christianity's lineage?

Until the last few decades, all we knew about Gnosticism came to us through the disputations of writers who lived between the second and fourth centuries. Their words were of passing interest perhaps only to students of early [church history](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx>). Then, starting in the late 18th century and continuing throughout the 20th, discoveries of texts and artifacts from the Libyan Desert to the Silk Road through China provided real insight into the Gnostics. Today, thanks to the volume of material now available to us, we can look at the subject in historical context. But as recent popular books have shown, the study of the Gnostics has not stayed within the confines of historical research. Dan Brown's blockbuster novel about the origins of Christianity and the search for the Holy Grail perched at or near the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list for more than two years, then reaped still more dividends at the box office (see "[Facing Facts \(/node/879\)](#)").

The term *Gnosticism* ([/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1124](http://www.visionmedia.com/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1124)) was apparently coined only in the 17th century. The movement appears to follow the reverse path of the [early Church](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx>): Jesus Christ called His disciples—who were originally not “Christians” but, according to the apostle Paul, simply followers of “the Way”—in the small provincial areas of Galilee and Judea. Then, after His death and resurrection, He sent them to the larger cities of the Roman Empire. The Gnostics, on the other hand, appear to have started in the great urban areas and eventually retreated to the fringes of society. This is not to say that Gnosticism was rejected by the educated elite of the cities. Rather, its apparent marginalization is a reflection of the tendency of philosophers to seek the quietude of the country or deserts as a place for reflection.

Gnosticism owes much to this philosophical basis. Officially it began in the second century and lasted within the Roman Empire until its ban in the fifth century. But in reality it is still alive and well even to this day.

The true origins of the Gnostics are difficult to establish, for the simple reason that the movement never tried to chart its history. Perhaps they attempted to establish their legitimacy on the premise that they had existed from time immemorial. From another perspective, having their origins shrouded in mystery tended to support their central belief—that Gnosticism was a religion based on revelation and hidden spiritual knowledge resulting in special insight. It did not need a history of its own: that would only reduce its adherents to the level of any other religious convert. According to Gnostic sources, knowledge was given in the earliest days of human history, only to remain hidden from most until the last days.

THE OTHER SCRIPTURES?

It’s interesting to examine the writings that the Gnostics considered holy. A large collection of literature came to light at [Nag Hammadi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nag_Hammadi_library) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nag_Hammadi_library), Egypt, in 1945 (see [“Luxor’s Lost Library](http://www.visionmedia.com/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1121) ([/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1121](http://www.visionmedia.com/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1121))). No book from the Hebrew Scriptures was found among these Gnostic texts, though the Nag Hammadi collection did include works that rewrote and reinterpreted the creation account from the early chapters of Genesis. And books that bore the name of any patriarch who lived before the Noachian flood, such as Seth, enjoyed distinct favor. The clear implication was that Gnosticism had existed since the creation of humanity.

Similarly, the find didn't include any book that appears in the New Testament. Numerous gospels attributed to individuals who appear in the New Testament *were* part of the find, but they were of a different genre. They relate not to the life and teachings of Christ but only to His purported sayings as recorded by those who, the Gnostics claimed, possessed specially revealed knowledge from Him. Rather than the practicality that is the hallmark of the entire Bible, mythic themes tend to dominate the writings of the Gnostics.

At the time when the movement was becoming firmly established, many people believed they were living in the last days of civilization. The growing popularity of the Gnostics (the self-proclaimed chosen people and recipients of true knowledge or insight) was therefore quite understandable. Among the writings found at Nag Hammadi were several apocalypses—books that are supposed to reveal knowledge about the end-time. But these texts were very different from the New Testament's Apocalypse of John, more commonly known as the book of Revelation. That work is filled with allusions, references and typology taken from the prophetic books of the Old Testament, which provide a starting point for comprehending John's writing. Understanding the Gnostic apocalypses, however, depended solely on mystic insight.

Notable among the works found in one particular codex of the Nag Hammadi library was a copy of Plato's *Republic*. Its inclusion is unusual in that, unlike most of the other works, it claimed no relationship at all to the biblical accounts. Yet the Greek philosopher's work was apparently intended to be read as part of the literature of the Gnostics.

REWRITING HISTORY

From this body of material one can begin to understand some aspects of the Gnostic perspective. They had adopted the Hebraic Genesis account rather than certain Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek or Roman stories about human origins. But there the connection to any form of Hebraic thinking stops (see "[Hebraists and Hellenists](http://www.visionmedia.com/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1125)" ([/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1125](http://www.visionmedia.com/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1125))). Having modified the account to change the identity of the Creator and the circumstances of His work, as well as what happened in the Garden of Eden, the Gnostics proceeded to reject the entire historical basis for the Hebrew people and the involvement of the God of Israel in history. Several of the Gnostic writings contain polemical statements against those who are described in the Bible as the servants of the God of Israel—whether Moses, the prophets, or even John the Baptist. It is as though an attempt is being made to undermine the whole Hebraic component in history, a component that is essential to both the Old and the New Testament.

The same could be said of Gnostic equivalents of the New Testament. Gone are any Gospels that portray a Judean or Galilean setting. Enter speculative philosophy based on dualistic Platonic ideas. The statements and personalities drawn from the Gospels and other writings in the New Testament are interpreted “spiritually and allegorically, using for this purpose the categories of Greek and in particular platonic philosophy,” writes W.H.C. Frend in *The Rise of Christianity*.

How could such a syncretistic set of beliefs arise?

Although people have often sought the origins of the Gnostics among the Jews, such a connection cannot be easily established. Clearly any Jew who took part in the formation of Gnosticism or who desired to be considered Gnostic would have rejected any claim to his heritage or background—in fact, his whole upbringing—and taken on a radically different identity and mindset.

Yes, Jews were interested in Greek philosophy. In the first century, Philo of Alexandria expressed his Jewish faith in terms of Platonic thought. He had gone so far as to attempt to reconcile the biblical account of creation with *Timaeus*, a work in which Plato tried to explain the origin of the world. But for Philo, the idea of rejecting his Jewish identity and heritage was beyond consideration. He debated a group of his fellow Jews who had rejected physical circumcision of male children—an essential Jewish identity element—in favor of its spiritual counterpart, referred to as “circumcision of the heart.” Philo responded with a vigorous defense of physical circumcision of all Jewish males. Yet his opponents had not gone as far as the Gnostics, for whom circumcision, whether physical or spiritual, meant absolutely nothing. Imagine, then, what his reply to the Gnostics would have been.

Of more recent date, some have postulated that the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 C.E. (and the attendant persecution against Jews by the Romans) led Jews to reject their whole history in favor of the Gnostic approach. This is completely implausible, however. Scholars have described the Gnostic attitude toward any form of Judaism in terms such as “cosmic anti-Semitism.” It is hard to understand, therefore, how Jews would have accepted something that denied all the identity markers and history of Israel. To effect so profound a paradigmatic shift so quickly would demand such a thorough denial of one’s past as to be inconceivable. The New Testament records the account of the apostle Paul, who is the prime biblical example of a “conversion” of religious belief. After his conversion, far from turning his

back on his Jewish upbringing, Paul constantly built on his previous education in Judaism and drew lessons from it for his listeners. This would have been impossible for others who sought to convert from any form of Judaism to Gnosticism.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD SAMARITAN

The one exception to the absence of detailed Gnostic history relates to Simon Magus of Samaria. While his role as actual founder of Gnosticism is debated, the biblical book called the Acts of the Apostles characterizes him as a Samaritan miracle worker who deceived the people into accepting his claim that he was the great power of God (Acts 8:9–11). The rebuke of Simon by Peter and John is consistent with the words recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah against the forbears of the heretical Samaritans (verses 20–23; compare Ezra 4:3 and Nehemiah 2:20).

Earlier in its history, the region known as Samaria had been occupied by 10 of the tribes of Israel, comprising the Northern Kingdom. (The ancient nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms after the death of King Solomon in the 10th century B.C.E.) In the eighth century B.C.E., the Assyrians took these 10 tribes into captivity and brought in replacement inhabitants from Babylon. The immigrants blended their own beliefs with the religion of the Israelites, which they learned from an Israelite priest who was sent back to Samaria to instruct them (see 2 Kings 17:20–41).

When the Jews (the Southern Kingdom) returned from their own subsequent captivity in Babylon in the sixth century, they came up against the now well-established and syncretistic Samaritans. The Bible portrays their relationship as fractious and competitive. The Jews revered Jerusalem with its temple, while the Samaritans claimed Mount Gerizim as the superior place for worshipping God, especially as they claimed to possess the original version of the Torah.

In the late second century, the Jewish king Hyrcanus I and his sons destroyed the Samaritans' temple and capital city. The Samaritans nevertheless continued to antagonize the Jews and to demonstrate an inclination to accept outside cultural and religious ideas. Their willing Hellenization under the Seleucids showed them to be a community without a fixed sense of identity. The Jews, on the other hand, had had their identity so deeply ingrained through history that they strove to avoid the imprint of Greek civilization.

In view of Samaria's antipathy to things Jewish, and given these further historical and cultural realities, it would have been possible for a man like Simon Magus to craft a new worldview that would parody the whole basis of the Jewish world. According to second-century Catholic writers Irenaeus and Justin Martyr (who was from Samaria himself), Simon was well acquainted with the Hellenistic philosophical perspective in which he clothed his argument. These writers report that Simon portrayed not only himself but his consort, Helena, in classical Greek roles: she was the fallen woman, represented in Platonic language as the "first cause," whom Simon, "the great power" had come to save (see Acts 8:10).

Simon's followers, known as Simonians, are listed among the heretical groups that Justin Martyr and Irenaeus identified (see "[*What Simon Said*](#) ([*visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1129*](#))").

BEYOND SAMARIA

When Peter and John totally rejected Simon Magus, the precedent was set for John's reaction to another man, Cerinthus, toward the end of the first century. Cerinthus is universally acknowledged as having been a Gnostic leader, and the earliest individual to be described in purely Gnostic terms. The account appears in the writings of Irenaeus, who took it from Polycarp, a follower of the apostle John. Polycarp mentioned an occasion when John and others went into a bathhouse in Ephesus, only to find Cerinthus also using the facility. John is reported by Polycarp as exclaiming, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within." From this testimony, we know that Gnostic ideals were established as a philosophy before the end of the first century and that they were seen as opposing the truth taught by the apostles.

Although there are reported to have been Gnostics in Rome and Asia Minor in the first century, by the second century their intellectual home appears to have been Egypt. (Indeed, Egypt and North Africa continued to attract Gnostics throughout the first four centuries. The region was a fertile ground for the last of the major Gnostic groups, the Manichaeans, before they were expelled from the Roman Empire. (See "*Augustine's Poisoned Chalice*"). W.H.C. Frend notes that the movement emerges fully in the period from 130 to 180 C.E., when "Alexandrian Gnostics and their schools dominated the intellectual life of the Church." For example, Basilides, a disciple of Menander, established a school in Alexandria around 132 or 135. Valentinus, another well-known Gnostic, taught first in Alexandria, moved to Rome around 135 or 140, and left for Cyprus in 160. Valentinus is considered the most successful of

the Gnostic teachers. His disciples founded a number of schools throughout the Mediterranean basin. Notable were Ptolemy, Heracleon and Theodotus, all of whom continued to develop Gnostic ideas, bringing further diversity to an already complex philosophy.

This historical overview helps explain why it is difficult to compare Gnostic texts written at different times. Second-century writers portray a growing Gnostic movement, changing and developing with each generation—a multifaceted philosophy that draws ideas from the followers of Jesus Christ as well as from philosophy. In many ways, Gnosticism is the ultimate application of Platonic ideas to the teachings of Jesus, in which Jesus *and* His teachings are completely recast. As we have already seen, the Gnostics were anti-Jewish in that they rejected the Hebrew Scriptures that legitimated the Jewish people. The same antipathy is evident with regard to New Testament writings.

A PLATONIC RELATIONSHIP

Gnosticism was eventually banished from the Roman Empire and all but disappeared, but it should not be presented as the loser in the struggle with the orthodoxy that emanated from Rome. While Gnosticism may have departed the scene in the empire, the orthodoxy that remained had absorbed many facets of Gnostic understanding and its approach to the Scriptures. The two are in fact siblings, the result of the same interpretive approach to Scripture, although differing in degree. It is true that the Gnostic approach was a more extreme form of Platonizing than that used later by orthodox theologians and writers. But in the Egyptian arena, Gnosticism did influence some who are now seen as pillars of orthodoxy, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Arius, treated as a heretic over his understanding of Christ's preexistent state, considered himself orthodox, yet he was clearly influenced by the Gnostic environment. Almost a century later, Augustine of Hippo became "orthodox" via association with the Gnostic Manichaeans.

On the other hand, what we know as the New Testament is the product of Judaic writers speaking to fellow Jews as well as to gentiles who wished to acknowledge the God of Israel as established in those Holy Scriptures known as the Old Testament. It was their view that the Apostolic Writings were to be read through the lens of the existing Scriptures, which validated the teachings of the later texts. The writings of the Gnostics, by contrast, are written on a totally speculative basis.

A more challenging issue is that Jesus of Nazareth, as presented in the *Gnostic* writings, would not have been viewed as a threat to the religious authorities of His day. Nor would He have elicited a following among the common people. He simply would have been out of place among the Jews of His day.

Furthermore, the apostle Paul, whom scholars and theologians have presented for generations as the bridge between the original followers of Christ and the subsequent orthodox Christianity, has become fully repatriated within the Judaisms of his day (see "[From Jew to Gentile \(/node/371\)?](#)"). The book of Revelation, the only apocalypse included in the New Testament, is radically different from apocalypses of the Gnostics in that it is based on imagery and typology from the Old Testament.

So the New Testament as we see it today stands in stark contrast to the ideas of the Gnostics. The discovery and subsequent study of Gnostic documents actually demands the reconsideration of the entire New Testament as a product of the Jewish milieu. The result is that all the writings of the apostles must be recontextualized within *their* world rather than the Hellenistic world in which generations of commentators have tried to place them. This calls for a total reevaluation of the lineage of what is called Christianity.